

Ibsen's Beginnings

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Our primary relationship to any play, at its beginning, is one in which we are learning how to experience it. The beginning of a play is that portion of its temporal unfolding in which we move from virtually no knowledge of its contents to--depending on our capacity to respond--a more or less full and functional awareness of what and who it is essentially about and what its course of action is likely to be. I say "virtually" no knowledge because, setting aside preliminary announcements of content in the form of reviews or blurbs, we are likely to possess from the outset certain limited expectations based on such sources of information as our prior familiarity with the dramatist, the title of the play, and the like. Nonetheless, the bulk of the learning process goes on after the play begins, as we confront its initial concrete images, both verbal and non-verbal, and enter into what Jonathan Culler calls "the adventure of discovering and producing a form, of finding the pattern amid a mass of details."¹ To use the terminology of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., this process is one in which we discover the play's "intrinsic genre"--i.e., "that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy," that sense of the whole without which we would possess "no way of grounding and unifying [our] transient encounters with details."²

The details we encounter during the beginning of a play are not only numerous but of several different types. We view some sort of physical setting and gradually come to pay attention to particular features of it as they impose themselves on our consciousness through their own innate qualities or because one or more of the actors relates to them in defined ways. We see and hear the actors present bits of information about the characters they represent and about the characters' attitudes toward and involvements with one another.

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We listen to the words being spoken and distinguish recognizable ideas, emotions, feelings, and desires. We detect a mood, a tone, an emphasis, a seeming focus, an apparent anticipation of something to come.

But, of course, and as my language in this attempt to provide a condensed survey of such details has necessarily suggested, we do not content ourselves with merely responding to the play's details in isolation. All this time--though we are seldom aware of it--we are striving to make sense of what we witness by establishing connections of various kinds. Drawing on the assortment of "norms" we have acquired through prior experiences in life and, especially, the theater--such norms as the moral values of our society or the conventions of New Comedy--we gradually organize the individual details into some sort of meaningful hierarchical structure.³ More and more, we become able to discern a particular situation, identify the character or characters who dominate it, isolate and comprehend the issues upon which the success or failure of these characters will depend, and recognize as it occurs the inception of an action through which the destinies of these characters are to be fulfilled.

By this time, we are no longer starting with the individual details that we encounter and trying to move from them to the links that apparently connect them; on the contrary, we have begun to perceive and therefore understand these details only in terms of the meaningful structure our prior acts of connection have caused to take form in our consciousness. The structure has become established as our primary link with the play. If new details conflict sharply with this structure, we may have to revise it or even conceive a different one in its place, but revisions of this sort are not usually necessary. Ordinarily, the same structure remains in force throughout the play, although it continues to develop (almost in the sense of this word associated with photography) as each new detail helps fill in the existing outline. But to pursue the formation of the structure into this stage is to go beyond the present topic into a consideration of the play's middle and end. Once the structure is firmly established, we have reached the end of the beginning. We have come to know what the play is about and are ready to appreciate the various ramifications of its particular design.

This process of becoming familiar with a play's design obviously differs from work to work. The more a play relies on familiar conventions, the more easily and rapidly we grow accustomed to its world and activities. If we have seen one New Comedy we have by no means seen them all, but we are certainly better prepared to accommodate and assimilate the details of the next. On the other hand, the more original and/or more complex the work, the more difficult and lengthy the process becomes. An alert spectator, even one lacking all knowledge of the conventions of New Comedy, should require no more than five or six minutes to grasp the probable design of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, while for *Hamlet* the process obviously lasts much longer, probably throughout the whole first act, and even then prior familiarity with the genre of revenge tragedy would be well worth having. Nonetheless, these are differences of

degree rather than kind; for most plays, the process is essentially the same in that we move fairly methodically and as quickly as the level of complexity will allow from ignorance to knowledge, from no familiarity with the play's workings to an effective preliminary grasp of its design. For most plays, but not for all. One mark of Ibsen's dramaturgy is the peculiarity of the beginnings of the majority of his plays, the highly individualistic way in which they modify this process. The beginning of *Hedda Gabler*, which employs most of Ibsen's characteristic modifications, provides an excellent illustration of his beginnings and how they work. In the first three segments of *Hedda Gabler*--a momentary static glimpse of the setting, a conversation between Aunt Julle and Berte the maid, and a conversation between Aunt Julle and Jørgen Tesman--Ibsen quickly establishes several facts about the situation and suggests others. Hedda and Jørgen have recently married and have just returned from a long trip abroad that served jointly as honeymoon and as research-trip for Jørgen. They are taking up residence in a splendid, costly house, last owned by the widow of a cabinet minister. The marriage came as something of a surprise--at least to Berte--for Hedda ("General Gabler's daughter"⁴) stems from a higher class and better background than Jørgen. Moreover, she is evidently rather imperious and demanding, for Berte fears she won't be able to satisfy her, she has already taken firm charge of the household in ways that surprise both Berte and Aunt Julle, and it is suggested that she is indifferent to questions of money when making sure that her desires get fulfilled. Jørgen, in contrast, is far more easygoing and obviously rather satisfied with his situation. He has come from a secure and deeply affectionate family circle, consisting of himself, his two aunts, and Berte, and he would clearly like to hang on to these ties as long as possible. After a lengthy struggle--financially and apparently otherwise as well--he has begun to achieve a notable success: his diligent scholarship has been rewarded with a Doctorate conferred on him during the trip, and he has "the best possible prospects of becoming a Professor one of these days." He is a bit worried about the cost of the trip and the house Hedda insisted on having, especially when he learns his aunts had to mortgage their annuity in order to put up security for the furniture, but he doesn't seem worried enough to keep his mind on these issues for very long. Aunt Julle obviously dotes on her nephew. Berte has served her and her invalid sister for years, but she is quite willing to send Berte to this new household because Jørgen simply must have her to look after him. She feels no qualms about mortgaging her annuity, because she has always sacrificed and struggled to help Jørgen succeed. And now she has received her reward, for she seems even more pleased with Jørgen's achievements--especially his winning the highly sought-after Hedda--than Jørgen himself. Aunt Julle's ready sacrifices and her belief that she can through her own efforts solve any problem these sacrifices create show her to be a woman of considerable inner strength. Her strength and her doting on Jørgen also manifest themselves in a far less admirable way when she rejoices almost viciously that those who stood in Jørgen's way have

fallen, especially Eilert Løvborg, who was the most dangerous and appropriately has suffered the worst fall--"the poor misguided creature."

These segments introduce a rather clear-cut, easily grasped situation that is made all the more accessible by certain details of its presentation. The idea of something beginning is strongly conveyed through a variety of means: the numerous bouquets that take up nearly every available space in the living room, the morning light streaming through the glass door to the veranda, and the countless instances of change and pending change constantly alluded to. The obvious focus of these images of a new beginning is the marriage of Hedda and Jørgen, which is on the very morning the play begins entering into its real start after the artificial beginning of the honeymoon trip abroad. Moreover, none of the facts of the situation in any way conflicts with the idea of the marriage's serving as the focal point, for all the facts that have so far been introduced are undeniably domestic in character; they concern family ties, issues of money, and questions of the husband's career, all of which can easily be seen as relevantly subordinate to a basic question involving the newly entered-into marriage: are there any obstacles that might threaten to prevent this marriage from blossoming into a successful manifestation of middle-class well-being? Even the tone of the play is appropriate, for there are several mild and light-hearted jokes, such as Berte's assumption that Jørgen's doctorate allows him to cure people and Jørgen's own naive inability to understand his aunt's attempts to discover whether he has impregnated his wife. Ibsen also seems to be having considerable fun with Jørgen's dry-as-dust scholarship, his apparently endless collecting and sorting of materials on the domestic industries of Brabant in the Middle Ages.

All of these characteristics should suggest that *Hedda Gabler* is one more example of an intrinsic genre that might be called the Newlywed Problem Comedy, an important example of which had already long before delighted the Norwegian public, Bjørnson's *The Newly-Weds* (1865), a play strongly influenced by French models of the same sort, especially *Un beau mariage* by Augier,⁵ and often regarded as Norway's first drama of contemporary middle-class life.⁶ The problem in Bjørnson's play involves the formation of an independent unit in the new marriage. The action begins when the husband, fearing his wife's parents are trying to turn him into their property, forces the wife to move away from them and thus initiates a year-long period of discord that seriously threatens the survival of the marriage. Fortunately, a friend of both, who would like to have the husband for herself, sentimentally decides to sacrifice her own interests and work on behalf of the couple's happiness. She manages to reconcile them and bring about a happy ending. The husband yields a little, the wife yields a lot, the husband makes up with his inlaws, and the wife asks them to leave so that she and her husband can be alone.

The first three segments of *Hedda Gabler* do not as yet specify a particular problem in the newly-formed marriage, but they do suggest several trouble-spots. Perhaps money will constitute the primary issue. The Tesman

household is clearly spending beyond its means, and although Jørgen has great prospects, they have not as yet materialized. There is also, moreover, the mention of Eilert Løvborg, who once stood so dangerously in Jørgen's way; although he suffered his well-deserved fall, he has just published a new book --is it possible that he may somehow stand in Jørgen's way again? Another area of possible difficulty involves Aunt Julle. She may be "kindly looking," as Ibsen describes her in the opening stage direction, but she can be nasty minded, and she is possibly also much too possessive of Jørgen. One wonders why Jørgen simply must have Berte to look after him: is it really Jørgen's needs that govern in this case, or is perhaps sending Berte to look after Jørgen the aunt's way of keeping some kind of hold on him after he has moved to his own home? As the title declares, however, this is primarily Hedda's play, and in all probability the major issues threatening the successful evolution of the new marriage are Hedda's aristocratic background and her initial inability to adapt herself to much different and from her point of view far more meager and common circumstances.

The next two segments of the play--with Aunt Julle, Jørgen, and Hedda and then Jørgen and Hedda alone--strongly reinforce the notion that the play focuses on Hedda's conflict with the new family she has married into. Throughout the episode with Jørgen's aunt, Hedda remains cold and aloof, resisting all expressions of warmth and all attempts to draw her into matters involving the family, keeping her distance physically, constantly moving away, sometimes deliberately changing the subject. When Aunt Julle, convinced Hedda is pregnant, kisses her, Hedda "frees herself gently," saying, "Oh--! Let me go." She shows displeasure with several things the others have approved or now take delight in: not just the idea of carrying new life within her but also such things as the sunlight streaming through the door and the flowers filling the room. She seems uninterested in Aunt Rina's condition and expresses marked distaste for the slippers Jørgen is so excited to have returned to him. She complains about Berte and criticizes Aunt Julle's new hat, although she *may* genuinely believe that it is the maid's hat and the maid who left it on the chair. When Aunt Julle is gone, Hedda seems to regret her reaction to the hat, but she justifies it on the grounds of propriety: "But what kind of manner is it to fling one's hat about like that in here in the living room! One doesn't do that." She reluctantly agrees to be more forthcoming with Aunt Julle, but only within certain limits: she won't bring herself to address her by the familiar pronoun, and Jørgen will have to be satisfied with her *trying* to call her "Aunt." Jørgen can't understand Hedda's aloofness; he merely thought that since she now "belongs to the family--" But here Hedda once again interrupts, moves away, and quickly changes the subject; she has suddenly noticed that they need a second piano, one that will go better with the fine furnishings of their new home.

Some details of these two segments tend to be out of keeping with the established intrinsic genre. Hedda seems far too lacking in warmth, displaying

aversion not only to Jørgen's family and its concerns but also, apparently, to things--like the idea of having a baby--that most people value highly. The excess of fury she expresses physically while Jørgen is showing his aunt to the door strikes too serious a note, and, when Jørgen returns, her gloomy preoccupation with the yellowed and withering leaves outside does not seem to be merely a pose struck for his benefit. Nonetheless, these segments for the most part continue and even increase the prevailing light tone. Jørgen's slippers, Hedda's contrempts with the hat, and Aunt Julle's feisty response all provide moments of effective comedy, making these episodes richer in such moments than those preceding them. Furthermore, the issues confronting the characters are remarkably trivial and seem easily resolvable: one can throw out a pair of distasteful slippers, or hide them in the back of a closet, and, surely, one can grow to tolerate the relatives of one's spouse, even a possibly interfering aunt. Hedda doesn't seem to have much of a case. We may side with her to some extent on a matter like the slippers, but essentially we see that it is she who has to yield, who must learn to accommodate herself to her new and far from undesirable circumstances. A spectator who remembers Ibsen's preceding play may very well even think of the word "acclimate." In many respects, *Hedda Gabler* is shaping up as a kind of urban, and much lighter, *The Lady from the Sea*.

Now that a clearly defined situation has been established, we are ready for an action to arise from it, and thus the final speeches in the Jørgen and Hedda segment, which anticipate the arrival of Thea Elvsted, carry a considerable impact. The arrival of an outsider, particularly an unexpected and unlikely arrival like Thea's, constitutes an extremely common formal indication of the beginning of an action, especially in the plays of Henrik Ibsen. Thea, moreover, has interesting past ties with both Jørgen--she is an "old flame" of his--and Hedda, who remembers her as the girl "with the irritating hair that she went around attracting attention with" and also recalls that Thea now lives in the same general area where "he has been staying--he--Eilert Løvborg." Thea's impending visit--which in keeping with Ibsen's characteristically bold juxtapositions follows immediately--thus promises to initiate an action designed to test the new marriage in several ways, including Hedda's potential jealousy of Thea and, given Hedda's obvious interest in Eilert, Jørgen's of his former rival.

Hedda's reception of Thea is outwardly in complete contrast to the way she treated Jørgen's aunt. She greets her effusively, pursues her about the room as eagerly as earlier she had retreated from Jørgen and Aunt Julle, physically forces her into a seating arrangement of seeming snugness and intimacy, and rather than constantly changing the subject compels Thea to tell her story, prodding her into new continuations whenever Thea shows reluctance to go on. Hedda is, however, in reality no warmer with Thea than she had been with Aunt Julle. She is obviously manipulating Thea and doing so because of an intense interest in the subject of Thea's narrative: Eilert

Løvborg and Thea's relationship to him. This revelation about Hedda complicates our growing sense of the play's design without fundamentally altering it, but one is less immediately sure how to place what we learn from the narrative itself. Thea has somehow managed to help Eilert undergo a rehabilitation and to produce the new book that has made such a sensation. She has also clearly fallen in love with him and has followed him to town because she fears he may suffer a relapse. Among the many other temptations of the city, there is also a particular woman from Eilert's past--Thea doesn't know her name--who was ready to shoot him when they separated and whom Eilert has never been able to forget. From Hedda's keen interest in Eilert and from the intensity of her questions at this point in Thea's narrative, we may well conclude that the woman from Eilert's past is Hedda herself. Yet there is no firm basis for this conclusion, and Hedda prompts us to discount it when she reacts to word of the shooting threat with the same sense of social indignation she had previously shown toward Aunt Julle's faux-pas with the hat: "One doesn't do such things here." Besides, there is evidently a better candidate: Thea supposes it to be the red-haired singer with whom Eilert was once involved and who is unfortunately just now back in town. Whatever the exact nature of Hedda's interest in Eilert, the episode is disconcerting. The fullness of the information conveyed about Eilert, the familiarity of the pattern to which his story conforms, and the intensity Thea lends it could easily lead us to suspect that the preceding segments were merely preparation of some kind. Perhaps the action of the play really centers not on the Tesman marriage but on Eilert and finds its beginning not on the morning the play opens but sometime in the past.

Fortunately, the next major episode, the visit of Judge Brack, restores the focus on the marriage by clarifying how Eilert's story fits in. Brack chats about the Tesman financial arrangements--bringing back this emphasis--and then gradually, with considerable reluctance, reveals that Jørgen is no longer a shoo-in for the Professorship, which now must depend on a competition between Jørgen and the newly rehabilitated Eilert Løvborg. Now all the pieces have fallen into place, and Brack's arrival has turned out to be the really significant one. The prospering of the marriage *is* the key issue, and the action is to involve the rivalry between the husband and the other man, whose opposition certainly threatens the financial basis of the marriage and may even threaten its romantic basis. The only details interfering with our confident recognition of *Hedda Gabler* as a typical, if more than usually complicated, example of the newlywed problem comedy are the undercurrents of something potentially more serious and more profound stemming from Hedda's nature and the extremeness of her antipathy to Jørgen's family and their values. The hints of her interest in Eilert enhance these qualities of the action, and interestingly enough Ibsen also strongly emphasizes them as the act ends. Instead of showing concern about the new threat to Jørgen, Hedda greets it as a diversion. What Brack has called a "competition" and a "contest," she

labels a "kind of sport." And when Jørgen assures her she can no longer think about keeping open house, or liveried servants, or a riding-horse, she announces that she will therefore have to amuse herself with her father's pistols.

Anyone familiar with *Hedda Gabler* in its entirety knows perfectly well that these undercurrents more genuinely reflect the real concerns of the play than the design Ibsen has so painstakingly established through the vast majority of the details of his first act. Ultimately, the most remarkable feature of the play's carefully elaborated beginning is that it has little to do with its middle and end, the central business of the remaining acts, and, in fact, much of Act Two is devoted to cancelling the established intrinsic genre and substituting a new and more accurate one in its place.

To some extent this is a matter of character focus. Aunt Julle does not appear in this act and Berte has been reduced to an occasional mere presence. Jørgen more and more seems to be emerging as a by-figure and the butt of laughter that we are invited to share with other characters. Brack appears in his true colors, and Eilert Løvborg enters for the first time. Mainly, of course, this adjusted focus pertains to Hedda. In Act Two, Hedda not only remains onstage throughout but she also begins to dominate the action as a title character ought to. Most of the substance of the act consists of two long *tête-a-têtes* between her and an intimate. For the first time, Hedda is involved in conversations dealing with her own actions and concerns, rather than those of another, and they take place under circumstances allowing her a freedom of expression she had at no time enjoyed in Act One. Hedda has in effect emerged from behind a veil to place herself at the center of attention and to take over the play in more than one sense. In the final segment of the act, she even speaks openly to Thea, who is more an adversary than an intimate, and as she does so, she defines the real action of the play about as explicitly as it is ever to be defined.

In addition to placing Hedda at the center of focus, Act Two introduces new information, some of which quickly and decisively undermines the validity of two key elements of the previously established intrinsic genre. Hedda's *tête-a-tête* with Brack indicates that the prospering of the Tesman marriage is in no way a matter of importance; for Hedda, in fact, it is incidental if not downright irrelevant. She claims to be disgusted by the word "love" and clearly feels nothing for Jørgen other than mild contempt. She married him, indeed, only because there were no other offers, he asked her, the match presented the appearance of being a reasonable one, and, as she says, "I had really danced myself tired. . . . My time was at an end." The second key element is demolished even more emphatically. When Tesman enters, he seems convinced--by Aunt Julle--that there is nothing to the report of a competition between him and Løvborg. We may interpret this as Jørgen's in effect whistling in a cemetery, but we won't do so for long. Eilert himself enters in a few minutes, and one of his first acts is to assure Jørgen that he won't stand

in his way. He doesn't want Jørgen's job, just a victory over him in public opinion.

Other new information of Act Two temporarily provides a new interim intrinsic genre before the real focus of the play is finally established. Hedda's chat with Brack flirts constantly, and in an appropriately sophisticated manner, with a topic of obvious interest to a young and beautiful wife bored to death with her marriage. This topic, of course, is adultery, both Brack's past liaisons and the one he would love to establish with Hedda, and although Hedda will say nothing openly improper or unequivocally binding, she seems to accept his proposition.⁷ The possibility of adultery becomes even more likely in her *tête-a-tête* with Eilert, where the same subject is evoked but without the coyly sophisticated verbal play of a particular social set. Hedda quickly assures Eilert that even though she doesn't love her husband she won't hear of any sort of infidelity. But their talk reveals that she responds to Eilert far more genuinely than to Brack, and just before it is interrupted she seems to express regret that she had not given herself to him years before when he tried to make their relationship an actively sexual one. This emphasis on adultery, the sophisticated style of Brack's chat with Hedda, and the new tone of the comic moments--in which the dominant note is one of ridicule--all suggest that *Hedda Gabler* is to be understood not as a newlywed problem comedy but as an example of the fairly recently evolved cynical French drama of adultery, possibly best represented by Henri Becque's *La Parisienne* (1885), which preceded *Hedda Gabler* by five years. Perhaps the real issues of the action are to revolve around Hedda's attempts to pursue her liaisons without exposing herself to ridicule by openly violating the proprieties.⁸

But the aftermath of the *tête-a-tête* with Eilert makes clear that this intrinsic genre is no more valid than the one it replaced. In these segments, as we realize definitely only in the acts to come, Hedda enters into the real action of the play by shaming Eilert Løvborg into going to Brack's bachelors' party. She does this, as she tells Thea, in order "for once in my life to have power over a human destiny," to control someone who in her eyes is worth controlling because he can vicariously put her in touch with the greatness her circumstances in life deny her and which she herself lacks the courage to attain on her own. Humiliating others about their hats or entering into a series of liaisons is not what Hedda Gabler seeks; what she yearns for is some nameless and undefinable quality of experience utterly lacking in the mundane world surrounding her and which has something to do with the abstractions "courage" and "beauty" and the imagery of "vine leaves in one's hair." Evidently she caught a glimpse of this quality once before, because her effort with Eilert is to regain a power that she held temporarily and tenuously in the past. As we watch Hedda continue to pursue her goal and realize that this pursuit forms the real action of the play, we will eventually also realize in retrospect that the key arrival in this play is not Thea's or Brack's but Eilert's. Since it provides Hedda with her opportunity to renew her pursuit, his arrival constitutes the

formal beginning of the action insofar as its direct presentation in the play is concerned. But we will also realize that this beginning is in reality not a beginning but a renewal. The action of *Hedda Gabler* is not only quite different from what we first understood it to be; it also does not, despite our initial assumptions, even begin with the beginning of the play, for it has already begun in the past.⁹ For centuries--at least from the time of Evanthius and Donatus (fourth century A.D.) to that of Dryden--academic critics were fond of dividing a play's temporal sequence into the *protasis*, *epitasis*, and *catastrophe*, eventually adding a fourth division, the *catastasis*. The *protasis* was variously defined as "the first action and the beginning of the drama, in which part of the argument is unfolded and part is kept back to hold the expectations of the people" (Donatus); the "first act . . . a faire Presentment of your actors. And a handsome promise of somewhat to come hereafter" (Jonson); and the "entrance, which gives light only to the characters of the persons, and proceeds very little into any part of the action" (Dryden).¹⁰ None of the definitions of the *protasis* that I have seen is either very specific or precise, and most of them are in keeping with the criticism from which they spring because they suggest critics who are paying more attention to one another than to actual literary works. Nonetheless, there is an essential soundness to this centuries-long preoccupation with the *protasis*, for it denotes a reality of the form of traditional drama: the appearance during a play's opening segments of a number of recognizable characteristics designed to introduce the spectators to the play by providing them with a preliminary sense of its design. This reality of traditional dramatic form has also occasionally been pointed to in more modern, if not much more specific, terminology, especially with regard to the plays of Shakespeare. One of the more specific of these modern commentators is Roland Mushat Frye, who notes that Shakespeare's "early scenes provide necessary background information, set the prevailing mood, and launch the major action of the play. This last function . . . also involves the presentation, at one point or another or in one way or another, of the dramatic conflict or problem which will be the focus of our attention during the remainder of the play."¹¹

Attempts to define the *protasis*, or beginning, have no doubt in part remained vague because beginnings of plays, although similar, are by no means formulaically identical. Besides differing conspicuously in their concrete details, they also differ in their organizations, their textures, and their durations. Nonetheless, certain common features can be distinguished. The beginning of traditional drama tends to open with some sort of striking incident--like the scene on the battlements in *Hamlet*--which is designed to capture spectator interest and commitment in the most rapid way possible. Beginnings also establish, in no fixed sequence, some sense of a milieu, the outlines of a situation linking the characters in relation to one another and to their external circumstances, the relevant antecedents of this situation, a focus identifying one or more of the characters as the chief object of our interest, an issue or group

of related issues requiring resolution, a direction in which things are likely to move, a mood, a tone, and an appropriate language--all of which, to borrow Jonson's words, add up to "a handsome promise of somewhat to come hereafter." Finally, beginnings also contain, at some point in their unfolding, a beginning of another kind, the Aristotelian beginning of the action. This launching of the action, as Frye calls it, will sometimes be recognizable only in retrospect, but ordinarily it is recognizable at once, either because of its conventional nature or because it is unequivocally provocative. Conventional action beginnings correspond to the initial phases of formulas (e.g., *Boy Meets Girl*) or make use of devices long since associated with launching the action (e.g., the arrival of an outsider). The provocative beginning--like Lear's attempt to divide his kingdom--is one that by disrupting the existing state of things unavoidably evokes responses both from the other characters, who must adjust in some way, and from us, who know something must happen next and are anxious to find out what it is.

The launching of the action may occur at any point during the beginning of the play, but it is normally preceded by one or more "preludes" devoted to other functions of the beginning. Machiavelli's *Mandragola* has two, a moderately lengthy one in which Callimacho informs his servant and the spectators of his irrepressible longing for Messer Nicia's wife and supplies all other relevant information, and a much briefer--and, given the familiar conventions, fairly unnecessary--one in which Messer Nicia appears and demonstrates his vulnerability. The act--and the beginning of the play--then end with Ligurio, Callimacho's master of intrigue, instructing Callimacho on their first move in the assault on Messer Nicia's wife. *Hamlet* also has two of these preludes, I.i on the battlements, and the first episode of I.ii (the meeting of Claudius and his court), before the action begins late in I.ii, when Horatio and Marcellus bring Hamlet word of his father's ghost. But *Hamlet* also contains further necessary expository episodes after the launching of the action, and it is not until the end of the first long act that a spectator has a full preliminary grasp of the play's design.

Hamlet and *Mandragola* also differ in other ways that exemplify important variations of the formal beginning. In both plays, the first act and the beginning tend to coincide, but the first act of *Hamlet* is several times longer than that of *Mandragola*: in *Mandragola*, therefore, the beginning is brief and abrupt, with the design sketched in almost at once, while in *Hamlet* the beginning is far more prolonged. Shakespeare often delays full clarification of the central issues for a few scenes, sometimes perhaps in order to arouse our interest, but for the most part he is compelled to do so because the basic design with which he usually worked is far more complicated than the simple, single-strand action of *Mandragola*. Act I, scene iii of *Hamlet*, featuring the Polonius family, interrupts the main business of the play just when we are anxious to know what the Ghost will tell Hamlet, and the interruption seems pretty clearly a contrivance designed to heighten suspense. On the other hand,

the main business of the play evolves within a multifaceted context from which this business derives its full meaning. What we learn about Ophelia, Laertes, and Polonius in I.iii--like what we have already learned about Claudius and his court and the threatened intervention of Fortinbras--is indispensable to our proper appreciation of all the ramifications of Hamlet's pursuit of revenge and probably needs to be absorbed before hearing the Ghost's report if the relevant ramifications are to be fully grasped. The beginning of *Hamlet* therefore necessarily exhibits a far greater richness of texture than that of *Mandragola* simply in order to fulfill the same function.

The differences between the beginning of *Mandragola* and that of *Hamlet* represent variations of degree within a single kind. The beginning of *Hedda Gabler*, however, deviates so radically from either of these beginnings, or the abstract kind they exemplify, that it obviously represents an entirely different kind of formal beginning. The first noticeable difference is the absence of an initial striking incident designed to arouse our interest and curiosity, but this difference soon pales in significance in the presence of far more radical departures from standard procedure. For a while Ibsen seems to be doing the same kind of thing as Machiavelli and Shakespeare, but eventually--and it is not until the end of Act Two, more than halfway through the play--we realize that instead of presenting his dramatic design he has been deliberately *misrepresenting* it. While the others work to move us as smoothly as possible from ignorance to knowledge, Ibsen deceives us concerning both the matter of the play--i.e., its central business--and its manner--i.e., its particular style and mode. And he further misleads us by indicating that the action begins with the beginning of the play when in reality it has begun long before. The real action of *Hedda Gabler* remains temporarily hidden, masked by a carefully established pseudo-action that is designed not only to deflect our attention from the real action but also to provide activity--busy-ness--so that the play can still amuse (divert!) us while its real business simmers, not yet ready for full and direct motion toward its goal. The beginning of *Hedda Gabler*, as it is completed at the end of Act Two, does resemble the formal beginning of traditional drama by introducing all the details necessary to a preliminary grasp of the dramatic design, but these details are accompanied by other, ultimately less relevant details of such number and prominence as to compel us temporarily to misvalue or misperceive the details of real significance and to devise false patterns of meaning that we must subsequently junk. Ibsen eventually conducts us to the same destination as Machiavelli and Shakespeare, but on the way he misleads us into developing basic assumptions that eventually we must revise or entirely dismiss.

The beginning of *Hedda Gabler* illustrates in extreme form the usual tendency of Ibsen's beginnings--by which I mean that, although Ibsen also employed the traditional beginning, a striking number of his plays--including many of his most distinguished--begin more or less in the manner of *Hedda Gabler*. The Ibsen plays that begin in the traditional manner are *Catiline*. *The*

Burial Mound, St. John's Night, The Pretenders, Brand, Peer Gynt, the two parts of *Emperor and Galilean*, and *An Enemy of the People*. This list includes some of Ibsen's masterpieces, but it is significant, I think, that all but one of the entries belongs to the first half of his career: of his final twelve prose dramas of contemporary middle-class life, only *An Enemy of the People* reverts to the traditional beginning. An equal number of his plays, including seven of the final twelve, closely resemble the structure I have analyzed above, with its temporarily hidden real design and its prolonged elaboration of a pseudo-design meant to divert our attention. Besides *Hedda Gabler*, this group consists of *Lady Inger, The Vikings at Helgeland, A Doll House, Ghosts, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, Little Eyolf*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*.¹² The remaining plays -- *The Feast at Solhaug, Olaf Liljekrans, Love's Comedy, The League of Youth, Pillars of Society, The Lady from the Sea, The Master Builder*, and *When We Dead Awaken*--also employ oblique beginnings, temporarily misleading us in one way or another about the play's design, but in these plays the deception is much briefer, seldom lasting an entire act, and thus the real business of the play can't remain hidden long enough to create the sense that it is finally emerging after a lengthy period of concealment.

Love's Comedy, for instance, focuses almost at once on Falk and his views, Guldstad's opposition, and Svanhild's apparent interest. But if the matter of the play is clearly in view, its seeming manner will for a few episodes prompt us to take this matter less seriously than we are ultimately persuaded to do. For, with its initial song, its wit, and its character types, *Love's Comedy* at first seems to be an example of a favorite contemporary theatrical genre, the *Sangspill*, a light-hearted comedy with songs, which in one of its versions featured as its hero a witty, clever student pitting himself against the bourgeois society of the town and particularly against a conformist and materialistic rival in order to win--without much difficulty--the young and beautiful heroine (and the financial security that comes through marrying her). *The Master Builder*, to take another example from this group, establishes at once the appropriate manner and soon introduces both the central character and the basic issues. Nonetheless, the elaborate initial focus on Solness' relations with the Broviks and Kaja Fosli misleads us into thinking, for the first half-act, that they are to have an importance for the action that never really materializes and that Solness' journey toward retribution--or emancipation--begins not in the distant past, as later proves true, but in the existing situation that Ibsen sketches so carefully in the opening moments of the play. *Pillars of Society*, finally, exemplifies the kind of beginning that introduces us obliquely to the play's design less by misleading us than by scarcely leading us at all. The initial segment, consisting of just thirteen brief speeches, suggests that the play is to involve class conflict and labor strife--a focus more typical of Ibsen's followers like Hauptmann and Galsworthy--but the next several segments introduce so many details of such different kinds and in so consistently casual a manner that we are hard put to perceive any design whatsoever. Only as the first act ends,

and only in retrospect, can we discover the patterns that organize these details. The unexpected arrival of the outsiders, Johan and Lona, is an obvious launching of an action, and for once we have to see the action begin before the prelude preparing us for it take on their full meaning.

Some characteristics of traditional drama seem at first glance to anticipate features of Ibsen's misleading beginnings, but closer inspection reveals important differences that help define Ibsen's distinctiveness more fully. In first linking the Ghost in *Hamlet* with Fortinbras' threatened intervention, Shakespeare is not creating a diversion of the sort Ibsen achieves with his initial focus on the Broviks in *The Master Builder*. He is instead introducing a particular perspective on the rottenness of Denmark and on Hamlet's revenge which remains relevant throughout the play and which comes into focus whenever Fortinbras is mentioned or appears. Fortinbras is a single strand in a complex design, a single note in the great chord that is the structure of the play. The Broviks and Kaja Fosli, on the other hand, rapidly fade from prominence and almost from view. Far from being Solness' adversaries, as they first seem to be, they end up (in the person of Ragnar Brovik) in the distinctly subordinate function of merely expressing the common-sense attitude toward Solness' climbing the tower and falling from it. Their initial prominence, like the newlywed focus in *Hedda Gabler*, is a loose end, a false note helping to insure that we arrive at our preliminary grasp of the play's design with difficulty and only after one or more false starts.

Similarly, when in writing *Othello* Shakespeare creates a structure that in midplay shifts the dramatic focus from Iago to the title character, he is not anticipating the structure of *Hedda Gabler*. *Othello*, like some other plays of traditional drama, employs a kind of compound action, in which one central business occasions and yields to another, as Iago's gradual seizing of control ultimately causes and makes way for Othello's vengeance against Desdemona. In *Hedda Gabler*, in contrast, Hedda's effort to manipulate Eilert does not arise from whatever action we previously assume the play to be dramatizing; on the contrary, it emerges from behind this initial mask to take its place as the one and only real action of the play.

Finally, although Ibsen shares with other practitioners of "artificial" narrative order his tendency to dramatize actions with extensive antecedents, he does not always share their methods of handling this form. Classical and neo-classical dramatists, as is well known, normally begin in the midst of things, but they almost always find some way of conveying all the relevant antecedent actions within the first few segments of the play, so that, in the treatment of antecedents, their plays do not significantly differ from more "open" plays like *King Lear*, which has extremely few antecedents to establish. In Ibsen, however, the most significant antecedents often lie temporarily obscured, either withheld entirely for some time, as in *Lady Inger* and *The Vikings at Helgeland*, or more often, as in *Hedda Gabler*, referred to so obliquely at their first mention that their true importance is unlikely to be perceived. Most plays,

in other words, assign antecedents to the status they are given in Aristotle's definition of a beginning as "that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be" (S. H. Butcher's translation of *The Poetics*, section VII). Their condition as existing before, of being prior to, is stressed; they have relevance to the action and, since they are necessary to a full understanding of the initial situation, must have had--despite Aristotle--some causal impact on it, but they belong to a separate and distinct existence, like the ancestors that are the antecedents of an individual. They rightly allow us to think in terms of "exposition," a static setting forth or expounding of something already seen whole, from which the dramatic element of linear sequence in time has been removed. Ibsen, by revealing the essential antecedents gradually and by unearthing them from behind a pseudo-action with its own previously given antecedents, makes these essential antecedents dramatic. He transforms antecedents from relics of some prior event into a fundamental part of the event at hand, that which the characters ultimately react to--as Hedda's suicide is an attempt to give full and final existence to a condition that she first sought in her past relationship with Eilert Løvborg, or as Solness' climbing of the tower in the final act of *The Master Builder* is an attempt to recreate and get right his initial defiance of God ten years earlier in *Lysanger*. In Ibsen, antecedents work like the antecedents of pronouns, prior in placement but absolutely essential to the meaning that the pronouns continue or complete; in Ibsen, the antecedents constitute the true beginning of the action we see completed on the stage. This change in status makes "the past" present, and that is why it assumes such power in his plays.

In effect, the drama prior to Ibsen offers few precedents for the kind of beginning he tends to employ. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*--with its plague that disappears from view after initially seeming so important, and its opening confident heroic quest of the present that turns out to be the tragic discovery of horrors performed in the past--is the only play before Ibsen with which I am familiar that fully anticipates the structure of *Hedda Gabler*, and it is possible that Ibsen learned his technique from *Oedipus* in the same way that, as is often thought, he drew on it in devising the retrospective method of his plays. He could also, however, have acquired the technique of *Hedda Gabler* by extending and developing the possibilities to be learned from those traditional plays that occasionally anticipate the more limited oblique beginnings characteristic of the third group of Ibsen's dramas as I have divided them above. In Shakespeare's *Henry IV (Part One)*, for example, until we are set right by Prince Hal's soliloquy at the end of I.ii, we are led to assume that we are being treated to one more version of the ugly-duckling/prodigal-son motif. Racine, moreover, sometimes begins his plays by focusing initially on secondary characters and their situations--such as Hippolyte's involvement with Aricie in *Phèdre*--thus reversing the usual procedure whereby the main-plot action is introduced before that of the subplots. These examples are not meant to imply that Ibsen

derived his technique for the oblique beginning from the great dramatists of the pre-nineteenth-century repertory--merely that occasional precedents exist. If he had to learn his technique from others, he had ample opportunity in the plays of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, the plays to which he was exposed during his active involvement with the theater in Bergen and Christiania (Oslo) in the first dozen or so years of his writing career. For something quite like the limited oblique beginning appears from time to time in those plays, especially in some of the plays of Scribe--the master from whom so many nineteenth-century dramatists acquired their notions of form--and even in occasional plays by Ibsen's fellow Norwegians like Bjørnson and Andreas Munch.

What matters, however, is not where Ibsen acquired his tendency to begin plays obliquely but the fact that he did so and the role this tendency plays in his work. Whatever precedents the works of others may offer, no dramatist prior to Ibsen made this kind of beginning such an essential feature of his plays. Despite the number of his plays that begin in the traditional fashion, it is an unmistakable characteristic of his dramaturgy. And like all characteristics of his dramaturgy, it reflects an aspect of his vision. When Bjørnson or Munch employ the oblique beginning, they seem to do so to some extent out of clumsiness, as if they don't quite know what they are doing. Scribe, who always knew what he was doing, seems to have used it in order to retard the tempo of the early scenes so that he might build gradually to the magnificent allegro and presto of his middle acts. In Ibsen, the oblique beginning has even richer significance, for it is directed at our fundamental perception of the dramatic experience.

As always, Ibsen is concerned with making us see--clearly, widely, and freshly--and to that end he wants to prohibit all preconceptions. His characteristic beginning moves us into the central business of the play in such a manner that we are involved in it before we see it taking shape. It is difficult, therefore, to label this experience ahead of time and thus set up a cerebral barrier preventing full responsiveness to its particulars; besides, by the time the *real* central business of the play has been established we have long since learned not to trust our first impressions. But Ibsen's oblique beginning is not just a tool designed to help us share his vision more fully; it is also itself a partial expression of that vision. In using it, as in other characteristics of his dramaturgy, he was resisting, if not downright rebelling against, traditional dramatic form with its propensity for coherent and finite events that begin and end in neatly unequivocal demarcations. The post-Kantian mind has come to recognize that such conceptions are fictions only and misrepresent the reality in which we live.¹³ Ibsen was one of the first artists to realize that form expresses as well as contains, and he declared his modernity by trying to shape new forms that would be more responsive to reality than the old. By declining to give us the standard beginning, which establishes "beginnings" as real rather than subjective phenomena, he was inviting us to perceive a new reality, a

reality of considerable fluidity and complexity and of great resistance to the familiar categories of tradition.

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Notes

1. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975) 148.

2. *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London, 1967) 86, 78.

3. For a full discussion of these "norms," see Culler's account of the five ways of "naturalizing" a text to make it intelligible 131-60.

4. All quotations from *Hedda Gabler* are my own translations of the original text as it is found in Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede Værker* (Copenhagen, 1900), Vol. VIII.

5. Francis Bull, *Norges Litteratur*, Fjerde bind (Oslo, 1937) 544.

6. Harald Beyer, *Norsk Litteraturhistorie*, redivert og utvidet ved Edvard Beyer (Oslo, 1963) 277.

7. As Caroline W. Mayerson remarks, Hedda "deliberately participates in the form, if not the substance, of marital infidelity with Brack"; see "Thematic symbols in *Hedda Gabler*," in *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Rolf Fjelde (Inglewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965) 136.

8. Speaking more generally about the play's generic signals and the comic treatment of Tesman in the first act, Bernard F. Dukore notes: "Soon, a potentially comic situation begins to bloom: a bumbling, naive husband ripe for cuckoldry--by two rivals, no less, Brack and Løvborg. Either sex triangle could be the basis of a conventional comedy." A few lines later, he adds, "In the next act, she [Hedda] and Brack engage in witty repartee, suggestive of comedy of manners." See "Half a Kingdom for a Horse: Ibsenite Tragicomedy," *Modern Drama*, 22 (1979) 228.

9. Sandra E. Saari, in "*Hedda Gabler*: The Past Recaptured," *Modern Drama*, 20 (1977) 299-319, argues that "the major action of the play"--in the sense of the term established by Francis Fergusson--"is to re-create the past in a perfected form" (300). She shows that--in keeping with the Fergussonian sense of "action"--each of the characters performs his or her own version of this common action, but her major focus is Hedda's own "series of attempts . . . to reinstate the past in her present life. . . ." Central to these attempts, according to Saari, is her (failed) effort to restore Eilert Løvborg to his former condition and to restore her power over him, so that she can once again experience through him the greatness lacking in her present life.

10. Ælius Donatus, *De Comeodia et Tragedia*, trans. George Miltz, in *Theories of Comedy*, ed. Paul Lauter (Garden City, N.Y., 1964) 30; Ben Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady*, closing chorus to Act I, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C.H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Vol. VI, (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1938), 527; John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy: An Essay*, in *John Dryden, Selected Criticism*, ed. James Kinsley and George Parfit (Oxford, 1970) 31.

11. *Shakespeare: The Art of the Dramatist* (New York, 1970) 144. The most detailed descriptions of the content of a play's formal beginning that I have been able to find are provided by the analyses in Chapter II, section ii, of Gustav Freytag's *The Technique of the Drama* (first published in 1863) and in Lecture Two of A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (first published in 1904), which essentially employs the Freytag paradigm of dramatic construction. The Freytag paradigm distorts the nature of the beginning, however, by distinguishing between the "introduction" (Bradley: the "exposition") and the "exciting force"

—the actual beginning of the action (or, in Bradley, the "conflict")—and by indicating that the latter is a distinct section of the play coming after the former.

12. In *A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen* (Cambridge, 1950) 115, Brian W. Downs observes of most of the plays in this group (plus some others I have excluded) that in them "one drama is, as it were, exhumed while the ostensible one is in progress, and it shapes the latter's end"; but he does not develop his observation along the same lines as my analysis, and he seems to be thinking primarily of the use in these plays of the retrospective method. Concerning the beginning of *Ghosts* and the early prominence of Pastor Manders, Richard Hornby writes, "the play . . . focuses more and more on Oswald as it progresses, and less on Manders. In fact, it appears that Ibsen set out intending to write a Problem Play, but more or less dropped his plan around the middle of the second act, as the characters and their situation began to move with a force of their own"; see *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays* (London and Toronto, 1981) 123-24. My argument, of course, is that what Hornby describes was a deliberate strategy on Ibsen's part.

13. The arbitrary and fictive nature of beginnings is one of the many themes explored by Edward W. Said in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (Baltimore and London, 1978); see especially 50-51, 77.